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Review of *Breathing Aesthetics* by Jean-Thomas Tremblay (Duke University Press)

by Tori McCandless | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT Jean-Thomas Tremblay's *Breathing Aesthetics* draws our attention to how respiration as a cultural analytic maps the uneven distribution of risk in our contemporary moment. Intervening at the intersection of queer theory and the environmental humanities, Tremblay deciphers an archive of cultural texts that range from CACConrad's ritualized poetry to Ana Mendieta's elemental performance art and Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters*. In so doing, they reveal an understanding of how breath registers precarity across race, gender, and disability, while also serving as a mechanism for healing and care. This discerning analysis, combined with a focus on the exchange between body and milieu, makes a case for respiration as a distinctly ecological and embodied relation. Ultimately, *Breathing Aesthetics* provides crucial insight into how aesthetic expressions of respiratory variations evidence a tension between morbidity and vitality within bodies whose ability to breathe is most endangered.

KEYWORDS aesthetics, art, environment, gender, humanities, performance, race, sexuality

Breathing Aesthetics. By Jean-Thomas Tremblay. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2022, pp. 248 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-1886-5. US List: 25.95.

With palpable verve, Jean Thomas Tremblay's *Breathing Aesthetics* surveys how breathing, as a literal and figurative medium, indexes environmental crises while heralding a dialectic between morbidity and vitality. At stake in such a project is Tremblay's contention that respiratory crises, underwritten by the uneven distribution of risk, are embedded in how subjectivities are constituted. Within

Breathing Aesthetics, what this means is that bodies and ecological milieu are never felt in isolation, that when we breathe, we are irrevocably imbricated in the spaces we inhabit—and with each other. Yet such a relation jockey between regenerative, life-sustaining practices and the violence inflicted on marginalized bodies, thus registering varying scales of oppression. In short, *Breathing Aesthetics* poignantly asks: how does breathing function as a “record of injury and a political vernacular” (5) just as its variations and interruptions might serve as a method for healing or pleasure?

Tremblay congregates a diverse repertoire of post-1970s literature, film, and performance art, while tracking the overlaps between queer and trans studies, the environmental humanities, and race and ethnicity studies. This myriad approach forwards a necessary intervention for scholarship invested in the interplay between bodies and environment—not to mention desire, ritual, and acts of survival staged in a precarious world. Those invested in the dialogue between sexuality studies and ecology will find this book indispensable. Moreover, the possibilities Tremblay maps for registering hurt and finding pleasure in a precarious world feel especially necessary as we enter our fourth year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Which is to say, their focus on how aesthetic mediation turns breathing into “a resource for living through crisis” (29) is timely. Of additional interest, in brief snapshots, Tremblay includes their own embodied experience of events such as the 2014 Black Lives Matters marches, reminding readers how crises in breathing shape the social fabric of our contemporary world, in addition to the forms of writing our scholarship must take.

In Chapter One, “Breathing Against Nature,” Tremblay turns to the films of Ana Mendieta and Amy Greenfield, paralleling how their work foregrounds troubled respiration as a method of resisting essentializing feminisms. Charting representations of breath as they intersect with elemental aesthetics, Tremblay mobilizes the term “postpastoral,” which undoes conventional affects tied to the sublime, rest, and even access to fresh air. Depastoralized breathing, then, stages

scenes where performers struggle to breathe or fail to find relief. Tremblay attends to Mendieta's *Grass Breathing*, where her body, covered by dirt and grass, can only be perceived via her distressed inhalations which move the ground. By rendering the body as a relation between subject and milieu, Mendieta, as a Cuban American woman, "indexes uneven geographies of asphyxiation" (52). Crucially, these geographies map how the "pastoral comes to feel bad" (43) amidst legacies of imperialism and colonialism. In Amy Greenfield's elementally titled films such as *Tides*, Greenfield swims through the ocean, holding her breath, submerging, and ecstatically yelling. However, the film mismatches sound and image, thus rendering a discomfort that withholds catharsis. As such, Greenfield remains wary of how elemental feminism links women's bodies to "nature," alternately framing scenes where breathing is disjointed and the pastoral, rather than replenishing, becomes suffocating.

In Chapter Two, "Aesthetic Self Medication (Three Regimens)," Tremblay considers how the self-writing of Dodie Bellamy, CAConrad, and Bob Flanagan manages desire and grief as it intersects with queerness and disability studies. Flagging how CAConrad sees themselves as part of a milieu that nurtures them while "also harboring violence normalized by transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, and racism" (77), Tremblay illustrates how mediations of ecological and embodied harm extend into modes of self-healing. They showcase one instance wherein Conrad's ritualized poetry provides a heuristic for breathing that sutures grief to homophobic violence, while in another, Conrad choreographs the inhalation of fresh air and herbs as a possible avenue for imagining oneself as another gender. Such a "regimen" envisions breathing as both a sign of hurt and a "medication." Flanagan's life-writing charts the impacts of cystic fibrosis on his body, especially as it comes to bear on his sadomasochistic and artistic partnership with Sheree Rose. Looking for breathlessness in Flanagan's performance art and life-writing, Tremblay models a generative methodological approach: they attend to actual breath in concert with its grammatical mediations. Ultimately, this chapter repositions how New Narrative's queer cohort, "casts breathing as a symptom and

antidote to crises" (69), while simultaneously calling attention to how desire constitutes subject formation.

In Chapter 3, "Feminist Breathing," Tremblay attends to the ceremonial poetry of Linda Hogan and Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters*, to show how feminist breathing stages rituals in order to constitute coalitions, even if the communities participating in these rituals are continually at risk. The chapter begins by tracking how "consciousness-raising" within feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s traded in the idea of an oppressed people finally "breathing air" (95). However, Tremblay importantly suggests that WOC feminisms, such as those of Cherie Moraga, inaugurated a recognition of who can mobilize breath as a cathartic mechanism, and how this is contingent on the "concealment of the breathing needs of women of color" (97).

Taking a reparative tack, they then discuss how Hogan's poetry dialogues with NourbeSe Philips's theorization of prepositional breathing. This theory disrupts genealogies of breathing that ignore the original, maternal act of "breathing for"—whether or not this maternal breathing is welcome or a radical act of hospitality staged amidst anti-black violence. Hogan's poetry alternately lingers in the tension between the earth as a source of nourishment and its irreparable toxicity while focusing on reproduction. In line with this recognition of toxicity, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* telegraphs scenes of healing that inform an investment in political futurity. For Bambara's female protagonists, "feminist breathing is communal training—a prep course for a return to activism" (110) that jettisons the idea that risk can be avoided. Across the chapter Tremblay contends that feminist "breath is reparative—and it is a call for reparations," it is necessary for survival and it marks the threat of not being able to survive.

In Chapter 4, "Smog Sensing," Tremblay orients their focus towards the urban environments of Renee Gladman's series *The Ravickians*. This genre-queer series centers on Ravicka, a city that is filled with yellow smog, while the narrative puts

pressure on the status of an event, rendering action as atmospheric and elastic. In *The Ravickians*, Tremblay develops the phrase “smog sensing,” as a way to describe how breathing is relational and architectural. Smog sensing aids Gladman’s characters in navigating the city amidst synthetic confusions and it acts as a technology: it is a way to perceive atmospheric contaminants and attune to built structures. As such, within Gladman’s experimental style “breathing, walking, writing and drawing appear coextensive, such that writing alters atmospheres and breathing produces lines,” (115) which ultimately speaks to how she conceives of the written line as measuring breath and producing narrative enclosures. Drawing on Black Studies, Tremblay then links what can’t be perceived in the atmosphere of Ravicka to the opacity of its inhabitants, suggesting that both Blackness and queerness are atmospheric, framed just beyond discursive recognition. In other words, Tremblay makes an important intervention that outlines how the aesthetics of smog sensing manifest a politics of opacity, wherein breathing as a “locus [for] the opacity of embodiment and experience reveals itself as resource for ethics and politics” (138).

In Tremblay’s final chapter “Death in the Form of Life,” they orchestrate a dialogue between films that document the dying individual’s last breath. Addressing *Near Death* directed by Frederick Wiseman and *Dying at Grace* by Allan King, Tremblay deciphers how the final moments between life and death in hospital settings are discursive. They argue that the nonviolent last breath is a matter of racial privilege while simultaneously highlighting how the insistence on a peaceful death is a fantasy generated by the living in order to manage loss and grief. While an overarching claim of *Breathing Aesthetics* is that we “never breathe strictly on our own terms” (139), its final chapter augments this claim, illustrating how these terms are also discursive, not just physical.

Surprisingly, I found Tremblay’s coda, “Benign Respiratory Variations,” one of the more inspiring moments of the text. The coda invokes queer theory as an instructive lens for addressing crises in breathing and is titled in homage of Gayle

Rubin's theorization of "benign sexual variations"—a term fashioned in the hopes of protecting consensual sex acts from state control and stigmatization. Gently linking sex and breathing, Tremblay foregrounds how "the state claims a monopoly over the interruption of respiration via police violence, environmental threats, and unaffordable health care" (160). Voicing the necessity of reclaiming these interruptions, Tremblay looks at a passage in Trisha Low's *Social Realism* where an S/M waterboarding workshop assembles a temporary community defined by "pleasurable respiratory interruptions" that "become a matter of collective responsibility and accountability" (161). This final meditation, both visceral and edifying, synthesizes the importance of *Breathing Aesthetics'* argument. In a world where our breathing is inherently morbid and unevenly imperiled—finding ways of collectively resisting while also reclaiming this precarity is vital.

Author Information

Tori McCandless

Tori McCandless is a teacher, writer, and PhD Candidate in the Department of English at the University of California, Davis. They are currently at work on a dissertation that explores the representation of environmental catastrophe and voice as it intersects with marginalized subjectivities in interwar poetry. Their writing can be found in *ASAP/Journal*, *Edge Effects*, and *Annulet: A Journal of Poetics*, among others.

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